

Study 3. Abraham's Shortcut

Abraham's Growing Faith

Genesis 16:1-16

On the 10th March 1967, one of the world's largest crude oil tankers of the time ran aground on rocks near the Scilly Isles off the South West coast of England carrying 120,000 tons of crude oil. At the time it was perfectly calm and excellent visibility. The skipper, Captain Pastrengo Rugiati, was neither drunk nor asleep, yet he chose that day to overrule his Number 1 and take a shortcut to go a slightly quicker but more dangerous route between Lands End and the Scilly Isles. Between those two points lay a line of rocks called the Seven Stones. To navigate past them would require pinpoint navigation, with an error of only one mile proving fatal. Bear in mind that the length of the ship was over 1000 feet and its draught 50 feet. Near that point was a lighthouse with men on guard guiding ships away from the rocks. They saw the Torrey Canyon coming toward the rocks and fired their warning rockets. They could see the ship's danger but Captain Rugiati could not. The lighthouse put up their warning flags as well—but on the Torrey Canyon swept, sailing at full speed, 16 knots.

At the very last minute, Rugiati realized his error and ordered his helmsman to swing the wheel hard to port, perhaps seeing the tide causing white breaker waves going over the rocks. But nothing happened. Horrified, Rugiati remembered that he had locked the steering into automatic pilot. He turned the autopilot off and slowly the great ship started to turn. But it was too late. At 8:50 A.M. the Torrey Canyon struck the first of the Seven Stones. Those who reported the accident in detail told how their captain stood on the bridge, speechless as three-quarters of the hull was split open and all the oil released into the open ocean heading for the English and French beaches. He had steered his ship and its precious cargo onto well-charted rocks in broad daylight and on a calm day. All of this happened because Captain Rugiati wanted to take a shortcut.

Can you think of a shortcut you once took? Were there consequences? Can you think of a time you shunned sound advice and experienced the results to that decision?

¹Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; ²so she said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abram agreed to what Sarai said. ³So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. ⁴He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. ⁵Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me." ⁶"Your slave is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her. ⁷The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. ⁸And he said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?" "I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered. ⁹Then the angel of the LORD told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her." ¹⁰The angel added, "I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too

numerous to count.” ¹¹The angel of the LORD also said to her: “You are now pregnant and you will give birth to a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard of your misery. ¹²He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers.” ¹³She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: “You are the God who sees me,” for she said, “I have now seen the One who sees me.” ¹⁴That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered. ¹⁵So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. ¹⁶Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael (Genesis 16:1-16).

Waiting is Part and Parcel of the Faith Walk

By the time of the event written above, Abram and Sarai had been in Canaan ten years, with Sarai now seventy-five years old and Abram eighty-five (Genesis 12:4 and 16:16). Sarai was starting to lose hope. At such an age it is entirely likely that she was past the childbearing age, physically. Did she feel like she let the family down? Why wasn't it happening? God gave Abram a promise that his offspring would become a multitude of people—but the details were somewhat sketchy to them. Was it was going to happen through Sarai? It is possible that all kinds of doubts began to come into their minds. When a person’s dream and vision do not seem to be coming to fruition, people often resort to “helping God out.” We start to second guess ourselves and ask the “maybe it’s this, and maybe it’s that” kind of questions. Many a servant of God has gone back to their original vision, dream or goal and questioned whether or not they got it right. There is no evidence that Sarai heard what Abram heard. God had only spoken to Abram. The first occurrence of Sarai hearing the Lord speak didn’t come for another fifteen years when she heard the conversation between God and Abram about the son that would be borne by Sarai at the age of ninety (Genesis 18:10). There is often a waiting period for a God-given vision or revelation of the Lord:

²“Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it.

³For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay (Habakkuk 2:2-3).

What significant waiting period do you remember?

I lived in Israel three times for several months at a time. The third time, I took my wife Sandy and lived there for seven months. We had been married about four years at that point. As we conversed with Arabs and Jews, once they realized we were married, the inevitable question was posed, “how many children do you have?” They could not understand that we had been married so long and had no children. To have no children after four years of marriage was very puzzling for Arabs as well as Jewish people. Children and family are a high priority for those in Middle Eastern culture. In Abram and Sarai's day, children were a vital sign of God's blessing and to carry on the family name. Sarai’s barrenness was a social stigma and a personal tragedy. We can imagine the many talks that Abram and Sarai may have had regarding God’s promise. They had traveled many hundreds of miles trusting God’s voice to go to the land of Canaan. We can only

imagine the agony they went through in the middle of the waiting process, being so advanced in years and yet not seeing the fulfillment of the promise of a son.

After ten years of being in the Promised Land, it seems likely they sat down and evaluated whether Abram heard God correctly. Perhaps Sarai was feeling like she was letting the family down and was a hindrance to the dream and vision that had brought them all the way from Ur of the Chaldeans, now 2800 miles away. It could be that Sarai began to think she was holding things up and that God planned to fulfill the dream another way. It is likely they were tempted to think they got the message wrong. After all, could God have meant to fulfill the promise another way? Many of us know the whole story from beginning to end and would say to them: “Abram and Sarai, don’t give up, with God all things are possible!” But we all know how hard it is to experience the waiting process when you are in the middle of it, living through it yourself. When we face those times of waiting, we need to remind ourselves of this wonderful truth:

The inability of man is God’s opportunity to glorify Himself!

Sarai and Abram’s Shortcut

The shortcut was at the initiation of Sarai. There had to be a way around this problem, she thought. Maybe God's purpose was for their family to be built around Hagar, their servant girl, who had been added to their household while in Egypt. Commentator R. Kent Hughes writes that this answer to their problem was perfectly logical and acceptable in the culture of the time and had been for a thousand years from Babylon to Egypt:

“Nuzi tablet Number 67 (which describes a marriage arrangement in ancient Mesopotamia) alludes to the surrogate custom: “if Gilimninu bears children, Shennima shall not take another wife. But if Gilimninu fails to bear children, Gilimninu shall get for Shennima a woman from the Lullu country (i.e., a slave girl) as concubine. In that case, Gilimninu herself shall have authority over the offspring.”¹

This shortcut might have been acceptable to the culture of the time, as indicated by writings of that day, but it wasn’t acceptable to God. Sarai’s motive was probably a good one, but a good motivation does not make a wrong decision right. Sarai loved her husband and trusted him implicitly and was willing to sacrifice even their unique intimacy with one another for the sake of his vision and dream to be fulfilled. This motivation says a lot for Sarai's commitment and character that she would do this for Abram, but there was no evidence that Abram and Sarai stopped to think about the consequences of what they were about to do. This shortcut was a life-changing decision. It seems it was a low point in Abram's faith walk. For him to go ahead with this shortcut even when he knew in his heart this was not God’s way was resorting to man’s way of doing things.

What do you think may have been the reasons why Abram decided to succumb to Sarai’s proposal? What are the elements that wear us down as we wait for God to fulfill our dream or vision?

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis, Beginning and Blessing*, Crossway Publishers, Page 238.

Abram seems to be the picture of a passive compliant husband, ready to try anything to get this vision underway. He is not a picture of a godly husband, prepared to protect the intimacy of his marriage. His first response to Sarai's idea should have been a courageous, "absolutely not!" Was there any seeking after permission of Hagar's father in Egypt? Did Hagar herself have any say in the matter? I'm sure she was asked, but she would have thought to herself that if she didn't go ahead, it would have meant her job, and another of the slave girls would be chosen over her. It would also mean demotion if Hagar would have said no. Hagar became a second wife to Abram and, as far as we know, God was not brought into the picture (v. 3). Of course, God had already revealed His will that a man would leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh (Genesis 2:24). The Lord had not changed His mind and allowed for a threesome!

Things were about to get complicated for Abram and Sarai. It does not take a lot of imagination to see how this affected their relationship, their home life, and even their faith. Culture and traditions may change, but there are at least two things that do not — the Word of God, and fundamental human nature.

[In what ways do you think things may have changed for Abram and Sarai once they decided to take this action, and Hagar conceived?](#)

The God Who Sees and Hears Us

When Hagar became pregnant, it was evident from the text that there were changes in the household and relationships. Things got messy! Hagar became proud and began to look down upon her mistress. We don't know what was said or the behavior of Hagar, but whatever the attitude of the younger Hagar to the seventy-five-year-old Sarai, it is one of suffering now for Sarai:

Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me" (v. 5).

Sarai now blamed Abram for his lack of leadership in allowing this shortcut to go ahead, and she was right. Abram was the leader of the home, the one who got direction from God and led the family accordingly, yet his leadership was reactionary and went with the flow, rather than seeking God for His guidance as to the strife in his home. When Sarai brought up the situation with Abram, he should have been the one to sort it out, but instead, he threw it back into Sarai's lap:

"Your slave is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her (v. 6).

Abram should have dealt kindly with Hagar and counseled Sarai to do the same. After all, they were the ones who came up with the plan in the first place. Unfortunately, Abram does not bear responsibility for Hagar. In his response to Sarai, he does not even call Hagar by her name but calls her 'Sarai's servant' (v. 6). It is as if he was distancing himself from the whole situation,

and Hagar herself, along with the child he brought into the world. It is a complete abdication of leadership, and Abram took little care for Hagar's soul. After using Hagar as a commodity, the young woman was cast aside. Surely, at this point, Hagar was a visible reminder of the failure of Abram and Sarai. How many unwanted feelings did this situation breed for all three involved? Hagar was left feeling this baby she was carrying was unwanted by the family of which she had become a part.

The young mother must have felt very insecure at a time in life when a woman needed even more security with a baby on the way. Can you imagine her grief and state of mind as she ran away from home? Hagar left the tent with Ishmael and went to a deserted place and sat down by a spring. A desolate place tells us she wanted to be alone, or maybe she did not feel safe, having been poorly treated by Sarai and not sure of Abram and Sarai's intentions toward her and the child she was carrying. She retreated, and licked her emotional wounds, so to speak, and sought solitude until an angel visited her.

Hagar and the Angel of the Lord

It is in that deserted place that the Angel of the Lord spoke to her. This angel is one who had been watching and listening to all that had been going on in the Abrahamic household. He spoke kindly to her and asked two very pertinent questions which is good for all of us to hear, “**where have you come from, and where are you going?**” (v. 8).

As we go through life, now and then it is good to sit down and assess where you have come from and where you are going. If you are aiming for nothing, you are bound to hit it!

Did you ever experience a time in your life when you felt aimless and did not know which way to go? Was God's direction sought? How did you emerge from that time?

This angel is no ordinary angel, but most scholars believe this to be an appearance of the second person of the Trinity. John, the apostle, in his gospel, reminds us that the Lord Jesus preexisted before taking on human form. He wrote that Jesus was with God in the beginning, and that through Him all things were made, and that without Him nothing was made that has been made (John 1:2-3). This angel did not speak for God but as God. He said, “**I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude**” (v. 10). This kind of language is not, “this is what the Lord says,” but instead, “this is what I say!” The Lord Himself was speaking to Hagar. Hagar knows who it is speaking to her, for she calls Him, “You are a God of seeing,” and names the well where she encountered the Lord, “**Well of the Living One who sees me**” (v. 13). Hagar was given vision and direction for her future. She is told to humble herself and submit herself to her mistress, and raise Ishmael in Abram's home. I'm sure her heart was encouraged to learn that she would be a mother to many descendants too numerous to count (v. 10).

Hagar had a revelation of the Lord that day. First of all, she found out that God hears the cry of distress, and to remind her; she was told to name her son by the name of Ishmael, which means *God hears*. Every day she looked at her son would be a reminder that God hears our crying out to Him. She was also given the revelation that the God watching over her sees all that is going on in her life—it is a good lesson for each of us.

We all have challenging times of waiting when our faith is tested. Even though Abram had many tests to his faith, and although he did not pass all of these tests well, he was still referred to as a man of faith in Scripture. We do not remember him for his mistakes, but rather for his decision to follow God's direction and go to a new place he did not know. The legacy he leaves is one of faith. This faithfulness on the part of God is a reminder to us of the great grace God has for all His children. He does not hold up our mistakes. He takes our damaged lives and leads us home from wherever we find ourselves, even if that place is a wilderness of our own making.

Maybe you can relate to one of the characters in this part of the story. Are you like Abram, worn down and weary in the waiting process? Are you like Hagar, finding that you are at a point where you need God's assurance and direction? Or, going back to our earlier illustration, are you like the Captain Rugiati, on automatic pilot, hoping for the best? Wherever you are in your journey of faith today, and whatever difficulties you are facing, God has the next step for you, even if that step is to continue to wait. He has a plan and direction for you, to lead you on from the place that you find yourself right now.

Prayer: Father, thank you for being the God who sees me, as well as the God who hears. Please steer my life to calm waters as I listen to the quiet voice of your Spirit in the desert that I often find myself. Amen!

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